BALKAN REPORT

POSAVINA THUNDER:

The Task Force Heavy Mortar Platoon in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

by First Lieutenant Clark C. Barrett

3 February 1996: Red section of the 4th Battalion, 67th Armored Regiment heavy mortar platoon is placed under operational control of one of the task force infantry companies, D Company, 2-15 IN. The Thunder Platoon was the indirect fire support and a much-needed fourth platoon for the mechanized infantry as they crossed the Sava River, moved into sector, and established the Emerald City Forward Operating Site (FOS) in the Odzak Pocket.

5 February 1996: Thunder Platoon receives the order to move 14 kilometers into sector and set up checkpoint operations overwatching a key bridge site on the Bosna River. Movement is set for NLT 1200 hours 6 February 1996. The platoon leadership conducts troop-leading procedures, cross-levels necessary supplies from the controlling company, and prepares for the next day's movement.

6 February 1996: After final pre-combat inspections and a mission update, the platoon is ready to move out. Red section is operating with four M106 mortar tracks, one M577 fire direction center, one cargo HMMWV, and one M925 5-ton. 24 soldiers were climbing into their vehicles when the call came over the fire net.

There were soldiers from a former warring faction (FWF) holed up in a building within the Zone of Separation (ZOS) — an area where the soldiers were forbidden to be. The platoon focus quickly changed from the movement and checkpoint mission to a hasty occupation fire mission. The fire direction center quickly determined firing data for a possible illumination mission — to compel the soldiers into submission if necessary. The guns were laid in, within the confines of Emerald City, and awaiting orders to cut rounds. After a time, a field artillery unit within supporting distance assumed the mission.

The Mexican standoff, as it came to be known, continued overnight as IFOR and FWF leaders tried to sort out who was where they shouldn't be. The Thunder Platoon received the order to stand down and resume its original checkpoint mission. By the end of the day, Checkpoint B-1 was secured, established, and operational.

This vignette describes a few days in 4-67 mortars' 8-plus month Operation Joint Endeavor deployment. It may seem like a rather ordinary operation. On the contrary, the nature of the missions in Bosnia was very different from what we are accustomed to in a high-intensity conflict. The mortar platoon and battalion leadership which employs it must be prepared to adjust doctrine to best employ this very important platoon during stability operations (STABOPs).[1]

By analyzing our mission in Bosnia within the familiar framework of METT-T, I hope to shed some light on how the task force mortars were employed and how future mortar leaders can prepare for similar missions. While sticking to basics, such as gun track and FDC operations, leaders will always provide the soldiers of a mortar platoon with a foundation on which to build and succeed. Those leaders who realize early that indirect fire operations in a STABOPs environment require a higher level of proficiency, and are able to adapt to this difficult battlefield, will be successful.

Mission

The ordinary mission for the heavy mortar platoon is to provide quick, accurate, and continuous fires in support of the battalion maneuver elements. They are the battalion commander's hip pocket artillery. This is true in the STABOPs mission too. However, the execution of these duties differs greatly.

The political nature of the Bosnia mission required stringent guidelines on the use of force. Our rules of engagement gave set criteria focused primarily on self-defense with the minimum force necessary to subdue threats to IFOR personnel. Direct fire against the assailants, and the assailants only, was the primary means set forward to deal with hostilities against U.S. troops.

By its nature, indirect fire is not very selective about those people, buildings, or vehicles that it harms. It is ideal for dealing with threats without exposing our own troops to danger but, more often than not, the opportunity for unacceptable collateral damage overruled the use of indirect fire. On the STABOPs battlefield, authority to use indirect fire is often held at higher levels, and obtaining this authority takes time.

Because the mortars provide the quickest fires on station, this requirement for approval authority often takes them quickly and irrevocably out of the

picture. This happened in the Mexican standoff. Mortars were first up and ready to send rounds down range. When the more versatile supporting field artillery battery was ready to fire, Thunder Platoon was released to continue its checkpoint mission. This was due in part to the more accurate nature of FA fires and the wider range of munitions available to the self-propelled howitzers (See Troops and Equipment).

What the mortars did do was act as an indirect fire umbrella for the outlying areas of the task force sector that FA couldn't reach. A platoon of tanks or BFVs was always available as a quick reaction force (QRF) for the FOSs and the task force base camp. Everyone understood that the mortars were a continuous, indirect fire quick reaction force. In support of this type mission, firing points were set up throughout the sector, with particular emphasis in the Odzak pocket (See Figure 1). These points were selected because they could cover the holes in the FA umbrella; they supported target reference points near IFOR checkpoints and named areas of interest; and they offered enough space for the section or platoon to deploy in proper firing configurations. This last factor was a major consideration. With the proliferation of minefields throughout Bosnia, IFOR movement was road bound. Checkpoint B-1 itself lay for several weeks on a road fill between two marked but unverified minefields. No Thunder Platoon members had any difficulty staying on the roads. But these restrictions do hamper ordinary mortar firing procedures.

On the high intensity battlefield, a mortar firing point is a covered and concealed plot of land that does not mask or cover fires and allows the platoon/section to deploy in any one of a number of formations — such as the lazy W. A minimum standard for this firing formation is that the tubes be aligned at 40-meter intervals in order to get maximum effects on the target. At CMTC or NTC, finding the perfect firing point is difficult enough; in Bosnia, with the restriction to roads and hardstands, it was all but impossible. Cover and concealment, unavailable on roads, was given up in favor of an appropriate firing configuration. The parking lots of destroyed schools and factories provided some of the most versatile firing points (see Figure 2). At worst, the platoon could stop and spin on any major road to support a fire mission — but this provided the least-acceptable firing

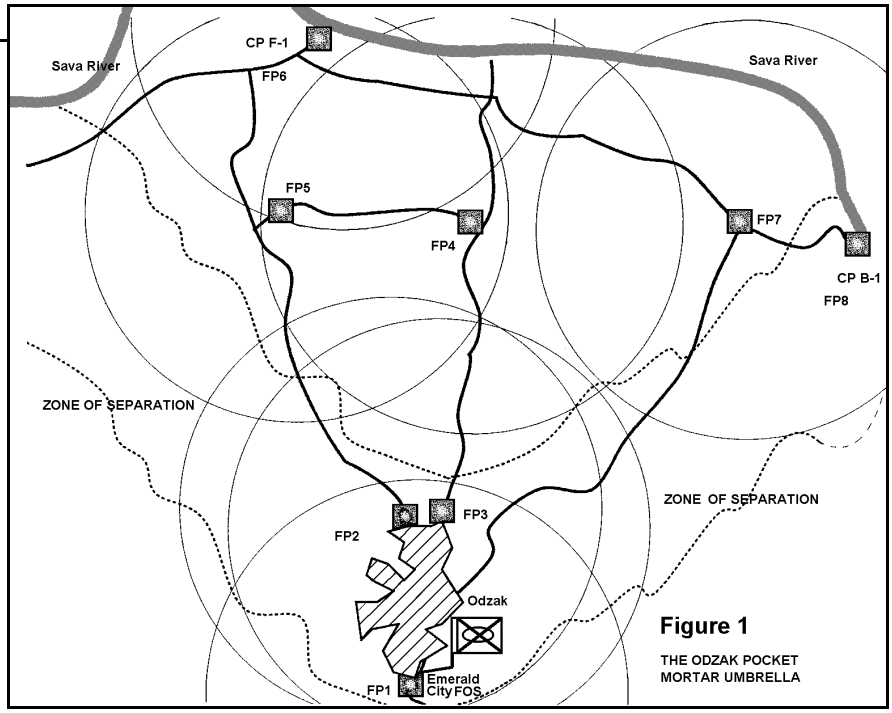

Fig. 1. Firing Points - Odzak Pocket

conditions and follow-on fire adjustments would be difficult or unacceptably slow as the gun tracks would have to adjust their position and orientation within the confines of a narrow strip of asphalt. A final point for consideration is that the guns should always be on station. When possible, whether at the FOS or on checkpoint, the tubes were laid in on a target and ready for adjustment. While the soldiers will have many additional duties (See Troops and Equipment), indirect fire must remain foremost in their minds. During the Mexican standoff, Red section was prepped for movement to B-1, not fire

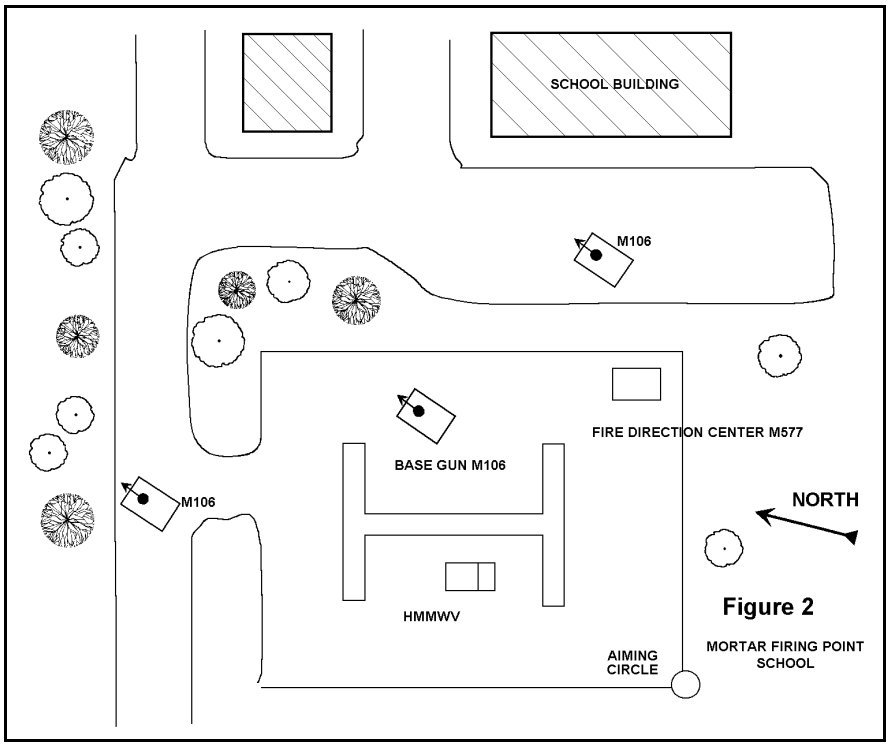

Fig. 2. Parking Lot Firing Configuration

missions. Excitement and solid training ensured that they changed gears to deal with what was a hipshoot mission and properly refined it into a hasty occupation. Guns were UP AND SAFE in record time.

Enemy

The former warring factions did not constitute an enemy, per se. However, they were armed and trained and, if they desired to, could have presented a formidable adversary. An organized threat was not likely, but we didn't dismiss it. The real threat to IFOR and U.S. safety was that, with three factions and numerous paramilitary groups operating in a relatively small area, any one group could stage an attack on IFOR personnel and blame it on another. These and other similar scenarios were possibilities that fortunately never materialized, but were nevertheless considered in our planning.

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This unnatural aspect of the Bosnian battlefield had a huge impact on Thunder Platoon operations. On the high-intensity battlefield, mortars are most often within supporting distance of, but behind, the front lines. The line companies provide protection to the vulnerable M106 mortar carriers. In the Posavina Corridor, there are no front and rear lines. The mortars often operated independently, conducting their own missions and providing their own internal security force — on firing points or checkpoints. The heavy mortars are accustomed to relative autonomy and were used in many cases like other maneuver platoons to conduct a variety of missions. Despite that, the mortars never relinquished their responsibility to provide indirect fires to the task force. The mortars also had to maintain the situational awareness to defend themselves, and the battalion had to plan to support them with external assets if necessary (i.e., a section of tanks or BFVs).

Terrain

Beyond the impact of the many minefields in the area, the terrain in the Posavina corridor, which is predominately a flood plain for the Sava River, did not affect the mortar platoon.[2] The rolling hills rarely masked or covered the mortar positions or roads. When they did, another more usable location was often just down the road.

In general, the Thunder Platoon's lightweight and small M106 mortar carriers were one of the most mobile forces within the task force. The area in which the task force was operating had many underclass bridges and roads that restricted the movement of the much bigger and heavier M2A2 Bradleys and M1A1 tanks. For this reason, the mortars were often the weapon system of choice to conduct presence patrols on the out-of-the-way, less-traveled goat trails in the sector.

IFOR established these patrols because it wanted the population to be aware that they were there to enforce the peace accord and protect the people, if necessary. For the mortar platoon, these patrols offered the added benefit of being able to stop and conduct training in their planned QRF firing points, reconnoiter new firing points, and practice hipshoots along their route to maintain their warfighting proficiency. The locals were often surprised to see a group of armored vehicles and soldiers spinning into action in their local school parking lot, but this served its purpose. The population recognized that we meant business, and the Thunder Platoon soldiers got a much-needed opportunity to train and retrain.

Troops and Equipment

By comparison to most of the other platoons in an armored battalion, the mortar platoon is a huge and strange beast. With a doctrinal strength of 36 personnel and 10 vehicles, it is over half the size of a pure tank company in personnel and vehicles. Stability operations missions are very manpower-intensive. The unit must perform all of the security, warfighting, and logistics requirements of high-intensity conflict, plus the myriad tasks that come with a peace enforcement mission. Whether overseeing minefield marking, bunker destruction, presence patrols, FWF site verifications, or the ubiquitous checkpoint manning, there is always one too many missions to perform — all in addition to normal duties.

Given the overwhelming number of missions, it should come as no surprise that the mortars operated almost exclusively in split sections. Thunder Platoon's 40 personnel and 11 vehicles were too much of a luxury to spend in one place. For that reason, Red section entered the area with four M106s and its command vehicles with D Company, 2-15 IN. Blue section, with two M106s and its command slice, was in support of the HHC at the TF base camp and TF TAC interchangeably. This task organization met with initial resistance from the platoon and its leadership. Under ordinary circumstances the sections are evenly split, but it became clear that this was the best solution. The heavy section, with 24 or so soldiers, was adequate to perform continuous checkpoint operations — particularly when tank platoons needed personnel augmentation to perform the same duties. Meanwhile the light section, with around 16 soldiers, could perform the indirect fire and guard force duties for the other elements. The composition of these elements rotated, so that no one would get into a rut, but the ⅓-⅔ split section usually remained throughout the deployment. It was an unhappy solution, particularly for those on base camp guard mount, but it served the battalion's needs well. It also highlighted the need for decentralized control of the mortar platoon and competent and responsible leadership to command its far-flung components.

The peace enforcement stability operations mission is well served by the composition of the mortar platoon. Well-trained 11Cs have the weapons

and experience to perform all of the regular infantry tasks, such as patrols and checkpoint operations. Their M16s, M60s, and .50 cals are adequate to settle or discourage most disputes. M9 pistols are woefully inadequate, and main guns a bit of an overkill for the remainder of the armored battalion. This does not suggest that mortarmen are the answer to all our problems. Nor does it offer the 11Cs as a ready force to do anything and everything — I assure you they are busy enough already. But it is clear that there are too many peacekeeping missions and not enough infantry to support them all.

The platoons that are still operating with old M106A2 carriers and M30 4.2-in. mortars would be better served with the new M1064 and M120 mortar, but fielding has been slow.

A final note about the equipment involves mortar ammunition and its very serious impact on the platoon mission. As described in the Mission paragraph, the FA often assumed the indirect role after a battle hand-off from the mortars. This is in partly due to the accuracy of the FA systems, but is more related to the ammunition available. Since HE missions were unlikely, unless a full-scale conflict broke out, that left smoke and illumination missions. Mortar smoke comes in only one variety, white phosphorus. Field artillery units have a High Concentration round in their repertoire. For the same collateral damage reasons, it is obvious that the likelihood of mortars firing WP smoke is very small. That left illumination as the only likely round to fire. While, in a show of force, an illumination round can show the enemy that they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and should do their best to remedy the situation, I believe it is clear that the mortar platoon is artificially and extremely limited in its capability to perform its primary mission in these kinds of operations.

Time

The only luxury that the mortar platoon had in Bosnia was time. Time to do the job right. Fire missions were still practiced at combat speed, but the platoon usually had time to ensure deliberate planning and execution for each mission. The supporting artillery battalion PADDS team surveyed the QRF firing points, an unusual circumstance for the mortars, which increased the accuracy of our positions.

We developed a play book so that gun crews would know the orientation and position of their tubes, no matter where their firing point was, and what target they were aiming at. Firing points were reconned, cleared, and deliberately selected to support numerous targets.

There was time to prepare defensible and safe fighting positions, time even to make an otherwise cold, wet, and despicable checkpoint into a place to be proud of. There was time to do all of these things. The number one rule in peace enforcement operations is: Always improve your position. The challenge in future operations may be to do all of these things even when you do not have the luxury of the time to do so.

The Joint Endeavor operation for Task Force 4-67 and Thunder Platoon ended in late September and early October, 1996 when CONUS-based military police units relieved us in place. There may be more U.S. units who pull rotations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the circumstances could be very different than those that Thunder Platoon encountered. Nevertheless, I hope that the lessons of the recent past will apply to the missions of the future.

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Notes

[1]The term Stability Operations (STABOPs) is chosen over Operations Other Than War (OOTW). STABOPs better describes the nature of the mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

[2]While the Posavina flood plain is by comparison very trafficable for armored vehicles, many of the mountainous regions to the south greatly restricted IFOR movement.